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ABSTRACT

A study investigated student involvement in large-group discussion. A high school sophomore American literature class and a world literature class for juniors and seniors were each observed for a semester. Students were asked to provide their definitions of knowledge and learning in a survey. From the 36 responses received, four perspectives emerged: (1) knowledge is content, while learning is process; (2) knowledge is process, while learning is interaction; (3) knowledge is global, while learning is memorization; and (4) knowledge is global, while learning is willingness to broaden horizons. When asked to describe a class discussion they enjoyed and to explain what they thought made a successful class discussion, students mentioned the topic, participants, atmosphere, and teacher involved. Conclusions of the study gave rise to attempts to improve class discussions. Groups of students took part in "fishbowl" discussions, addressing topics in small groups while the rest of the class observed. In a "conflict corners" activity, students divided into groups based upon their positions on controversial topics. In another activity, students debated the merits and evils of frequently challenged works of American literature. The goal of class discussion should be to help students view issues through the eyes of others. (SG)

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Climate for Controversy
by Louann Reid

Four boys discuss "Boar's Head," a poem by Tom Liner. The poem is about a trophy hanging over the mantel. Although the boar's eyes are usually dull and "it hangs there/gross and tasteless like a bad joke," the head changes in the firelight. The speaker suggests his feelings as he remembers the boar's life and the moment of the kill with "the hounds dying/in the mingled blood of beast and beast." In this excerpt two of the boys exemplify my image of an ideal discussion.

1: What I want to know is why did he call it "Boar's Head?" I mean, I know why he called it that, but why did he write about such a stupid thing?

2: 'Cause it makes you think about things. You know, it makes you think about hunting, where you go out to kill it just to put it on your mantelpiece.

1: That's disgusting.

[They discuss the meaning of "taxidermist" and where boars live.]

1: Why would he write about killing something and then it comes back to life? Is that what it says? Because he kills it, then it's on his mantelpiece, then [interrupted by the next speaker]

2: When he looks in his eyes that's what he gets from the feeling of it. . . . But that's . . . I mean when you look into something's eyes, you get a feeling of something different, don't you?

1: Yeah, that sort of changes the whole plot of the story.

2: But seriously, when you look into someone's eyes you see . . .

1: You see . . .

2: You see what they . . .

1: You see their interself.

2: But seriously, when you look into somebody's eyes, you see what they feel, what they see, and how they see it, in somebody else's eyes.

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In this discussion, the boys worked through the poem, combining evidence from the text and from their background knowledge. They returned to the first boy's question about the subject of the poem until he was satisfied with the answer. Together they built an interpretation, examining the theme of the poem. They later ended the discussion, satisfied with the meaning they had constructed.

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I want to recreate this kind of discussion with the whole class. I know it is possible to have 25 students actively participating. I have observed and occasionally led exciting, challenging, and informative large group discussions. Too often, though, I leave such situations dissatisfied and positive that the students feel the same way.

The Problem

The reason for this classroom study was that my whole-class discussions were not as effective as I would like. When I challenged students' thinking, as I would a colleague's, they stopped talking. Instead of questioning each other, they said, "Well, that's her opinion and everyone's entitled to their own opinion." Instead of 25 eager discussants, I often saw five, along with 20 disengaged dozers, note-writers, or whisperers.

To discover what engaged the disengaged, I observed one section each semester of an advanced American literature class for sophomores and one section of World Literature, a slightly advanced class for juniors and seniors. In April, I surveyed two of those classes regarding class discussions.

Survey

Primary data for this report come from the survey (attached). Knowing that I would probably continue to study this problem next year, I still thought such a survey might provide insights into the thinking of the sophomores in Honors and the juniors and seniors in World Literature. As I considered the questions I wanted to ask, I thought about a session I had attended in Indianapolis in March at the NCTE 1991 Spring Conference. Douglas Barnes, a noted British researcher, had mentioned a Canadian study wherein the investigator discovered that 9th graders saw knowledge as only facts. Therefore, they saw no need to have class discussions because facts either are or are not; there is no room for discussion.

Knowledge and Learning

The first two questions of the survey were designed to corroborate or challenge the Canadian researcher's finding. I asked students to first list words associated with knowledge, then to answer *"What is your definition of knowledge?"* and *"What is your definition of learning?"* Twenty-two sophomores and 14 juniors and seniors completed the surveys. Their responses reveal a wide range of views rather than a consensus and indicate that, for them, the two terms are interrelated. I identified four perspectives from their answers.

1) Knowledge is content; learning is process. This view was the one most frequently articulated. A Grade 12 female's comments were typical: "Knowledge has no definite definition except that it is the compilation of intelligence, wisdom and facts. Learning is the exploration, understanding and mastery of an idea."

2) Knowledge is process; learning is interaction. An 11th grade female represented this group of answers: "Knowledge is learning something that is taught to you, understanding what it is you learned, and gaining that wisdom. Learning is teaching someone something, and them understanding what you have taught them so they learn the new information."

3) Knowledge is global; learning is memorization. A 10th grade girl exemplified this idea when she said, "Knowledge is how much you know in a sense of learning with your heart and soul instead of only your brain. Learning is listening to what people have to say. I once saw a quote that said, 'If you're talkin', you ain't learnin'." In a variation on that position, a tenth grade male said, "Knowledge is the accumulation and understanding of facts, making connections between facts. Learning is the gathering of facts and information to memory."

4) Knowledge is global; learning is willingness to broaden one's horizons. A 10th grade boy articulated that position: "Knowledge is what people are constantly striving for more of. They search for complete knowledge, knowing all, and when if ever they find this, I would say they feel intense responsibility and pain for really seeing reality. Learning is when a person broadens his or her horizons. Gathering more information which might be for a present using. People learn every day. With every new situation you learn."

Each of these perspectives could be explored further in another study which correlated students' attitudes with their responses in discussions. For the purposes of this one, though, it is interesting to note that many did not see knowledge as solely facts as the ninth grade students in the Canadian study did. Rather, they saw knowledge and learning gathering and processing as they referred to intelligence, wisdom, facts, and connections. Students in my classes had other reasons for not participating in class discussions or for not participating in the ways I expected them to.

Elements of Successful Discussions

One morning in February, I was frustrated with the silences that frequently met questions in American literature. I had consciously varied types of questions, ranging from informational queries such as, "What was the setting of Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry?" to personal response invitations such as, "What did you notice about 'Mending Wall'?" I was pretty sure the sophomores had read the material and I was fairly certain they had something to say. I thought I had done everything "right" by having them write brief individual responses in their journals first to privately try out their "rough draft" ideas. So, to find out what was going on, I asked them to answer three questions in their journals.

1. Is there one right interpretation of literature?
2. Does everyone have to have the same opinion?
3. Then why won't you argue with each other?

All said "No," to the first two, as I had expected they would, but their answers to the last question were enlightening. Several said they felt uncomfortable with the people in the room; others said 8:00 a.m. was too early. Some reminded me that they did try to discuss, but others either criticized them or ignored them. It takes only one bad experience to silence a sensitive discussant.

Knowing why they were reluctant to talk was helpful, but I still did not know what they thought made a successful class discussion. For that, I had to turn to the survey later in the semester.

Questions Three and Four of the survey asked students first, to describe a class discussion that they had enjoyed and, second, to explain what they thought made a successful class discussion. Taken together, their answers to these two questions fell into five categories.

1) Topic. The topic for discussion was most often mentioned as a reason for enjoying the discussion and as a quality of a successful discussion. The qualities most frequently mentioned were controversy, interest, and familiarity.

Students in all three grades frequently said they wanted to discuss a controversial topic, one which was of value today, enjoyable and interesting. One sophomore criticized, "Most class discussions are steered by the teacher and are promptly forgotten once class is over." Another sophomore said that discussing why Huck Finn traveled down the Mississippi wasn't very interesting, but knowing why people might want to ban the book was.

Students were less specific about what topics might interest them, although many said "interest" was an essential quality. The few topics that they mentioned were the symbolism in Lord of the Flies, current music, religion, and the unknown such as UFOs or ghosts.

Most of them wanted to talk about subjects with which they were familiar or about which they wanted to know more. One student in World Literature wrote, "People must enjoy the subject and have previously reflected on it." An eleventh grade female described a Global Science discussion: "We take about 20 minutes or so to talk about what is on our minds like sex, drugs, etc. I learn a lot that way more about life and that discussion stays with me more than anything else will." In addition, tenth grade students mentioned enjoying games and simulations. One girl wrote of a mythology unit in Grade 9 Advanced English: "We moved all of the desks and pretended we were in a boat. More people contributed. Another time we played a type of Trivial Pursuit where the outcome was everyone sharing what they knew."

For these students, discussions of literature may be more successful after they have done other activities to understand the book. They do not seem to want to construct their knowledge through public discussion. They are more willing to argue when they are sure of their own ideas, although some indicated that they should leave

discussions with new ideas. A sophomore girl summed it up this way: "I think it has to be a somewhat controversial talk where everyone has a point of view and has thought on the subject so they can express feelings without being so hesitant to share their ideas."

2) Participants. All of the students recognized the importance of participation. Although one sophomore mentioned her appreciation for a teacher who did not pressure shy students into speaking, respondents from all three grades emphasized the need for everyone to contribute. Their favorite discussions were ones in which everyone was willing to share and participate, elaborating on each other's ideas and listening respectfully and tolerantly. One sophomore wrote: "There are a lot of people . . . that have a great influence on what you think. They make you feel like your ideas are too farfetched. A lot of people don't like to seem silly or out of the group." Respect was a concern for juniors and seniors, too, although not as many mentioned it. A female senior said, "I think a good discussion is when everyone has a chance to speak, and they are not put down for their opinion, or they do not have others' opinions forced upon them."

3) Atmosphere. The attitudes of the participants certainly contribute to the atmosphere, but respondents also noted a few other, more general, qualities. Several students in all three grades mentioned the need for humor and jokes in creating a comfortable atmosphere. One female senior wrote, "discussions that don't <u>feel</u> structured are usually more successful, " but she stressed that it still should be a discussion, "not a free-for-all." Besides humor and subtle structure, students also said they wanted discussions to be "quick-moving." Over and over, respondents stressed the need for comfort in the classroom. One female sophomore summed it up best: "easy-going atmosphere, non-threatening teacher willing to accept new opinions, students honestly listening and willing to bring up differing opinions."

4) Teacher. Students felt that the teacher also has a role in the success of class discussions. Most of the respondents would like a teacher with a sense of humor but opinions differed on the amount of teacher involvement. A senior boy implied that the teacher should not play the central role: "I think a class discussion should be quick-moving, contain fun as well as facts, and should be centered around having the participants interested in learning what they're being told, rather than simply talked to." A sophomore girl noted that both teacher and student involvement is necessary, "the teacher must put emphasis into the discussion and talk so that the students can relate what the teacher is saying to themselves." She continued, "when the teacher or the class is boring I cannot focus in and I give up because I figure that I won't learn anything in total boredom."

These sophomores, juniors and seniors enjoy discussions dealing with controversial topics which directly affect them. They want everyone to participate by contributing ideas and listening respectfully. Finally, they want the teacher to create a

safe atmosphere for such discussions. I want all of these things, too, so why don't we have them?

Reconciliation

In examining what students said about class discussions, I find myself trying to reconcile theory and practice. I firmly believe the theorists who contend that we learn through using language, that language forms and shapes our thoughts. But if that is true, why do student feel they must already know quite a bit about the topic before they can discuss it? Is the difference merely that class discussions are public and that fragile egos are involved? Or, have they had unpleasant experiences previously in school? If so, thought-language theory may not conflict. If not, where do the problems lie and what can I do about them?

In this section of the paper, I want to re-examine key elements of language learning theory in light of the results of the survey.

A Community of Learners

There are compelling reasons to create a literate community based on learning through talk. Judith Langer advocates a

> *sociocognitive view of language learning* that asserts that all learning is socially based, that teaching is ultimately an interactive process, that cognitive behaviors are influenced by context, and that such behaviors, in turn, affect the meanings that learners produce. (1985, p. 327)

This view reinforces my assumptions that learning is a process of making connections between new knowledge and old, that knowledge is constructed through language use, and that language is social in origin. The results of the survey show that students, especially sophomores, are heavily influenced by the context of the discussion. They repeatedly mentioned that the other participants needed to be respectful of all opinions, that all people needed to be comfortable and that the teacher should be "nonthreatening."

The context for language use appears to influence the thinking strategies that individuals use to understand literature. In my dissertation study of four sophomores reading poetry individually and in small groups, I found that they varied their cognitive strategies considerably as their social strategies changed. For example, they were more willing to admit difficulty when talking only to me rather than to their group of two to six. Benton had found that such admissions of difficulty could lead to increased learning (1986), but that wasn't a strategy these learners seemed to use.

Benefits to Individuals

If it is true, as Langer asserts, that all learning is socially based, it is important that students use language publicly. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, contends that language must be used both socially and individually for higher-level thinking to occur.

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. (1978, p. 57)

Thus, we should provide ample opportunities for students to talk among themselves because discussions are absolutely essential for the individual student's learning. The students who answered the survey questions seem to agree that discussions are important and they seem to like them under the conditions they specified.

What kind of learning occurs when students talk? Vygostky said that all higher functions originate socially. James Britton describes the process of learning through language:

> we construct a representation of the world as we experience it, and from this representation, this cumulative record of our own pat, we generate expectations concerning the future; expectations which, as moment by moment the future becomes the present, enable us to interpret the present. (1970, p. 12)

Although this learning also can occur in writing, talk is the medium we tend to use first. Yet, the students who answered the survey appear to prefer constructing their initial representation in some form other than class discussion. Perhaps this is the key to reconciliation between theory and practice and between what I envisioned and what I saw. Some students may need to use language privately or in small groups before they feel comfortable using it to learn in large groups. A large group appears to threaten egos and keep students from talking at all--at least until they feel fairly confident about the subject of the discussion.

I want my students to be literate thinkers, able to explore literature creatively and critically. I know that the context shapes the ways language is used and that those ways, in turn, shape the thoughts that we have and the knowledge we construct.

Some Attempts

Throughout the year, but especially after receiving the survey answers, I have tried to improve class discussions. There is still much to be done before I feel that I am close to achieving the ideal discussion, however, the following three activities indicate some steps in that direction.

Fishbowl Discussions

To discuss a novel or poem, students arranged themselves in two concentric circles. Those on the inside, in the "fishbowl," discussed the topic while those on the outside listened and observed. The rule that those on the outside may not talk proved highly frustrating to some verbal students but ensured more people an opportunity to have respectful listeners. After a specified time limit, usually 15 or 20 minutes, the students changed places with those on the outer circle moving to the inner. Now they could say whatever they had been waiting to contribute.

This structure provided opportunities for everyone to speak, virtually without fear of interruption. It also offered subtle pressure for everyone to speak because the group was smaller than the whole class and no one could hide. That pressure was an occasional disadvantage, especially the first time, because people felt self-conscious. After the second or third time this structure was used, the self-consciousness usually faded.

In course evaluations, students frequently mentioned fishbowl discussions as one of their favorite activities. I think they provided some of the comfortable atmosphere and flexible structure the students wanted. Everyone had a chance to participate and knew that people were listening to them. I generally left the specific topics up to them, saying, "Discuss anything that you want to about the book. You might think about things that startled, surprised, puzzled or affected you or you might discuss anything else. It's up to you." This starter proved to be a bit too vague for the sophomores, so I would like to think more about the topics before I try fishbowl discussions again. Using the students' comments about controversy and relevance, I would like to design some topics in advance for the literary works I know I'll be teaching. If they cannot get started, I may say something like, "Previous students have voted <u>The Scarlet Letter</u> as the most worthless book they have ever read. What do you think?" Or, I might say, "<u>The Scarlet Letter</u> has been banned in a number of schools. Do you think high school students should be allowed to read it?"

Conflict Corners

Another of the students' favorite activities was "Conflict Corners." I made a controversial statement such as, "Censorship of reading material is appropriate in public high schools." Students then went to one of the four corners of the room, depending on whether they "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," or "Strongly Disagree." In their corners, they consulted for a few minutes to form their arguments,

then they tried to persuade the people in other corners to change their minds and join the persuaders.

This activity seemed to meet the students' needs for controversy and debate. It also provided some structure without constraining what they could say. They are allowed to express their opinions freely and did not seem to feel that others were criticizing their opinions, probably because they could see that there were others who clearly agreed with them.

So far I have not used this technique to discuss literary works themselves. I would like to find topics that force students to delve into the work in addition to the topics I have already used that encourage students to relate issues such as censorship to the work. I have learned that careful wording of the topic is essential if true conflict is to occur. The statement must be relevant enough to be interesting, but controversial enough to have two or more equal sides. Something like "The language used in Huckleberry Finn is so objectionable that no one should be required to read the book," might work.

Debates on Challenged Books

The final activity arose as a direct result of the answers I received from the two classes. I wanted sophomores to read a final book of their choice and decided I could build on their desire for controversy by asking them to choose a frequently challenged piece of American literature. After researching censorship in general, and the challenges to their book in particular, they debated the merits of censoring the book. Two people read each book, then one advocated banning it and one supported keeping it available.

This activity worked extremely well. Although students were not necessarily expressing the opinion they personally held, they strongly stated the reasons others could have for either banning or keeping the book. They could do verbal battle with each other without feeling personally attacked. They had chosen to work with a friend and they knew much of what the other was going to say, so I think they felt protected, yet challenged.

The next time I use this assignment, I will be better able to recommend books with enough controversial content. Glass Menagerie was not a good choice because, although it had been on a banned list somewhere, we could not find anything objectionable either in the play itself or in news articles about it. Catcher in the Rye, on the other hand, was an excellent choice with plenty of arguments on both sides of the issue.

I wonder if there are other topics that would provide similar debates. The issue of censorship is an important one to discuss in any literature class, but perhaps there are others that would also appeal to students' desire for controversy. I would like to explore this more, too.

What Next?

From doing this research, I know more about how to fine-tune my teaching techniques. I have a clearer idea of what an effective, enjoyable discussion looks like to high school students and I know that they want both comfort and controversy. They want to disagree, but they also want to know that such disagreement is accepted and respected. They want some participation from the teacher but few challenges to their thinking, at least until they have a pretty good idea of what they think.

I think the atmosphere in my classes is usually pretty comfortable, but I want to remember the importance of that element of class discussions. In addition, I want to take some time this summer to think of controversial topics related to specific works of literature. As I teach classes next year, I hope to improve on the discussion structures I have already used and continue to explore alternate means of achieving the ideal discussion. All of my course activities will not employ whole-class discussions, obviously, but this is an area in which I want to be more effective. As the lights of ideas come on in students' eyes, perhaps we will realize, as the boys discussing the poem at the beginning of this report did, that we are better able to "look into somebody's eyes, . . . see what they feel, what they see, and how they see it, in somebody else's eyes."

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Survey Questions

1. What is your definition of knowledge?

2. What is your definition of learning?

3. Describe a class discussion in any subject that you enjoyed. Please include class, year, and why you enjoyed it.

4. What do you think makes a successful discussion?

5. Do you think the subject of the class affects your view of the discussion? If so, how?